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SIPDIS

DEPARTMENT FOR EUR/AGS

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SUBJECT: Pilot Project to Introduce Muslim Religious Instruction in Baden-Wuerttemberg Public Schools

REF: a) Berlin 979, b) 04 Frankfurt 5675

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1. (U) SUMMARY: In a first for Germany, the Baden-Wuerttemberg (B-W) state government will introduce religious instruction for Muslims in select public elementary schools beginning next year. Twelve schools will participate in the program's initial four-year pilot program. Five years in the making, the initiative was hampered in part by a fragmented Muslim position (reflecting the diversity of Islam in Germany -- ref A). All major political B-W parties welcomed the move, hailing it as an important step in integrating the state's large and growing Muslim population. END SUMMARY.

State Forecasts Continued Growth in Muslim Population

2. (U) According to an unpublished government report, the state's Muslim population has doubled since 1987 to 610,000 persons (5.7% of the state's population) -- considerably higher than earlier estimates of around 400,000. The report forecasts the state's Muslim population will grow by about a quarter in the next ten years (to over 750,000 in 2015). Experts cite continued immigration and a relatively high birth rate (every tenth child in Baden-Wuerttemberg is born to Muslim parents) as reasons for the increase. Turks and Germans of Turkish descent comprise the largest group (332,500 or about 55%). According to the report, 70,000 Muslim students are registered in B-W schools; the state has 318 mosques. Over a third of the state's Muslim population lives in and around the state capital of Stuttgart.

Pilot Program for B-W Islamic Classes Begins in 2006

3. (U) Beginning in 2006, twelve Baden-Wuerttemberg elementary schools will offer religious instruction for Muslim students in grades one through four as part of a four-year pilot program. Baden-Wuerttemberg and participating Muslim groups will jointly fund the classes. The B-W Education Ministry has already identified instructors of Turkish descent to teach the classes (in German). Religious instructors must attend certification seminars at a state teaching college (in the absence of university certification programs which currently exist for Christian and Jewish religious instructors).

4. (U) This breakthrough caps extended negotiations between state authorities and a diverse Muslim community (the working group for curriculum development, chaired by the B-W Education Ministry, included members of five Islamic organizations). After four years of discussion, the working group ultimately decided to make local Islamic organizations responsible for the classes in their area. Representatives of Alevi Muslims (about a third of the state's Muslims) say they will not participate in the classes and are awaiting approval of a separate curriculum (under consideration by the B-W Education Ministry) reflecting their religious views.

5. (SBU) Baden-Wuerttemberg Commissioner for Foreigners Christian Storr told us Minister-President Erwin Teufel (CDU/Christian Democratic Party) provided the final push to reach agreement prior to his retirement April 19. While numerous German states teach about Islam, Baden-Wuerttemberg will be the first to have an approved religious curriculum for Islamic students in public schools (along the lines of approved curricula for Protestant, Catholic, and Jewish faiths). Storr noted that female Muslim instructors will not/not be allowed to wear headscarves while teaching; the Ministry emphasizes that the curriculum is fully consistent with German constitutional values (including the rights of women). Future projects include plans to participate in regional initiatives to bolster university training for imams.

COMMENT

16. (SBU) Support for Islamic religious instruction spans the political spectrum, from the B-W Central Council for Muslims to state Education Minister Annette Schavan (an outspoken cultural conservative). For Muslims, the issue is one of equal treatment -- offering children of Islamic faith the same opportunity for religious instruction in public schools as other students. The state's political leadership sees the initiative as a means to integrate Muslims into mainstream German life. With reference to the new program, M-P Teufel spoke of the need to prevent the emergence of "parallel societies," while Schavan opined that "religious instruction belongs in public schools and not in places about which we know nothing" (i.e., behind closed doors in Islamic schools and mosques). END COMMENT.

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